

Steel Pier  
Boardwalk at Virginia Avenue  
Atlantic City  
Atlantic County  
New Jersey

HAER No. NJ-64

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD  
MID-ATLANTIC REGION NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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Steel Pier

HAER No. NJ-64

Location: Boardwalk at Virginia Avenue  
Atlantic City, Atlantic County, New Jersey

Date of Construction: 1898

Present Owner: Resorts International

Present Use: Tram storage and maintenance, a contractor's office,  
and a heliport

Significance: The Steel Pier was one of the major amusement piers  
built off the boardwalk in Atlantic City at the turn  
of the century. In 1898, the steel girder structure  
extended 1500 feet from the boardwalk into the  
Atlantic Ocean and was expanded to 1780 feet in the  
1930s. A variety of theaters, ballrooms, and  
amusement arcades were built on the pier to house the  
exhibits, vaudeville shows, concerts, films, and other  
diversions which entertained visitors to the resort  
city for the first three-quarters of the twentieth  
century.

Project Information: Mitigative documentation of the Steel Pier was  
undertaken in May 1982 by Oliver V. Haines, Jr., vice  
president of facilities planning for Resorts  
International.

Transmitted by: Jean P. Yearby, HAER, 1986

The Steel Pier in Atlantic City was one of a number of amusement piers built as extensions of the boardwalk. Its history reflects the heyday of Atlantic City as a resort during the 1920s and 1930s, and its slow decline before legalized gambling brought a new surge of development in the 1970s.

In 1870, the boardwalk began as a 10 foot-wide plank path laid directly on the sand. By 1896, with its fifth rebuilding, the boardwalk achieved the form it has today, a 40 foot-wide elevated structure with rails. Even before this, speculators had begun to seek ways to expand prime ocean front property. The first ocean pier at Atlantic city was built in 1880. It was soon followed by others and, in 1898, the 1500-foot, steel girder Steel Pier was built. At a cost of \$200,000, it was the most expensive and elaborate pier built to date in Atlantic City. The three main original structures on the pier were a casino, a dance hall, and a sun parlor. A good portion of the pier was taken up by a two-story, covered pavilion where people could sit or stroll and watch the ocean or other strollers. Entertainment provided on the pier was mainly sedate dance and band music.

The pier remained basically unchanged until 1924 when a fire badly damaged four hotels, part of the boardwalk, and the interior of the pier's entrance structure. Repairs to the pier included enclosing the entrance arcade. Then, in 1925, Frank P. Gravatt purchased the pier for \$2 million and quickly set about changing both the physical charcter of the pier and the sort of entertainment offered.

In 1926, Gravatt began alterations that created 20,000 square feet of exhibit space for General Motors. Automobile shows remained an attraction for the next forty years. The 1926 alterations also enlarged the casino to a capacity of 2,000. In 1928, Gravatt added three theaters to the pier and, in 1929, he added another one. Also in 1929, he rebuilt and enlarged the music hall and lengthened the pier to 1,780 feet.

Gravatt's philosophy of entertainment was to provide great variety at low cost. This combination apparently worked. The pier achieved its peak of popularity from the 1920s to the 1940s, as thousands came to dance to big band music and see the auto shows, the water circus, the movies and vaudeville shows, the opera, and the novelty exhibits.

The Gravatt era ended in 1945 when he sold the pier to George A. Hamid. The pier's popularity continued during the 1950s but, toward the end of the decade, the popularity of Atlantic City and the pier began to decline. Hamid kept up with the trends in popular entertainment, booking rock and roll groups in addition to the big bands that continued to play in the Marine Ballroom. But this no longer assured the pier's success. Physical disaster struck again in the 1960s. In 1962 a barge, cut loose by a massive Atlantic storm, cut the pier in two. The pier was repaired but, in 1969, a fire at the end of the structure destroyed one-third of the pier, including the ocean stadium and stage and the Marine Ballroom. These were never replaced, a sign of the pier

and city's continuing decline. In 1973, George Hamid's son sold the pier. In 1978, it was sold again, this time to Resorts International. The pier was closed shortly thereafter. It is presently used for storage and contractor's offices.

Sources of Information

Official Bicentennial Souvenir Program, 1976

Thayer, Paul. "Eighty Years of Steel Pier." Atlantic City Magazine,  
August 1981